

Wednesday July 4, 2012

## Is mysticism limited by language?

By Jim Taylor

I may be doing the Scots an injustice here, but I don't believe I have ever heard of a Scottish mystic.

Mystics seem to have a direct connection to the divine – through visions, trances, meditation....

Yes, there are holy places in Scotland. And in Ireland. All through the British Isles, in fact. But aside from Julian of Norwich, few mystics used the English language.

Eric McLuhan, son of and collaborator with media guru Marshall McLuhan, suggests this may have something to do with the language itself.

Among linguists, English is sometimes called the “hissing tongue.” It uses a lot of sibilants – those “sss” sounds made by squishing air between the front teeth and the tongue. To which the Scots and Irish add those “ach” fricatives at the back of the throat.

Robbie Burns wrote some captivating lyrics. But wrapping your glottis around his dialect is not likely to induce a meditative mental state.

Compare those sounds with the classic Asian chants, such as “Om mane padme om.” Or just “Ommmmmm...” Chant those sounds for half an hour, and you'll find them resonating through your skull.

The same holds true – perhaps to a lesser extent -- for Italian, French, Spanish, and Latin. The cavities in your head amplify the musical vowels, until they drive lesser thoughts from your mind. In that state of mild self-hypnosis, you can begin to hear rhythms underlying the frenetic busyness of everyday thoughts.

It won't happen in English, though. Those hissing sibilants will keep sucking you back into the present.

## The music of the mind

I would never defend the Latin Mass purely for tradition's sake. But it carried an aural richness that no English liturgy will attain.

I remember visiting a residence for retired Catholic priests. They had invited some visiting clerics from China, priests never exposed to the reforms of Vatican II, to lead a Mass.

They did it, of course, in Latin.

Several of the retired Canadians were moved to tears. Perhaps it was just nostalgia. But even I, an outsider to whom Latin might as well be Greek, could appreciate the powerful sonority of the liturgy.

At a workshop on meditation, participants were assigned individual mantras to practice with. We didn't have to understand the words, we were told. Just roll them around in your mouth and your mind....

A succession of mystics comes to mind: Francis of Assisi, John of the Cross, Meister Eckhardt, Catherine of Siena, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Ignatius Loyola, Teresa of Avila, Bernard of Clairvaux... All have been translated into English. But not one of them experienced The Holy in English.

Even the two great Irish saints, Patrick and Columba, spoke Latin. Or some form of Gaelic, a naturally musical speech.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that when we North Americans look for mystics, we look to other cultures -- the far East, or to aboriginal peoples. Remember the popularity of Carlos Castaneda?

The only English-speaking North American mystic I can think of is Thomas Merton – and he may have been more an intellectual than a traditional mystic.

Perhaps it's not that we're unsuited to mysticism. Perhaps our language works against us.

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## YOUR TURN

Last week's musing about address labels was a little off the wall, perhaps. But I got some interesting mail from it.

Lyle Phillips, for example, sent me a copy of a letter that he uses to respond to charities that send him unwanted address labels. If you keep wasting my donations on this kind of promotion, it says, I will have to reconsider my support for you.

Bob Chandler agreed with my gripe: "It really annoys me when organizations send me labels, seals, anything. I give to charitable organizations because I believe in them & don't expect 'gifts' from them. Thank God my church & United Way does not do it."

J. E. Mackie offered some practical advice to prevent anyone from using my labels for nefarious purposes: "Be sure to shred the address labels before you throw them out!"

Nancy Kerr shared her experience: "Back in the days when I worked for Mennonite Central Committee as an advocate for children and adults who were then considered to be 'developmentally delayed,' I gave out posters that said 'LABEL JARS, NOT PEOPLE'."

She added, "As for the label 'fundamentalist,' I treasure my high school classmate who would probably gladly accept that label. We're both Mennonites but have different ideas about the fundamentals of Christianity. However, I learn a lot from conversation with him. Lincoln is said to have deliberately composed his cabinet of people holding different positions on the current events of the day. It seems a good idea to gain access to people who hold differing positions in order to understand and learn more."

Isabel Gibson asked, "Throw out labels you don't intend to use? What are ya -- some kind of neat freak?"

[But] you're absolutely right -- it's so easy to disregard an argument because of who made it, rather than what it is. I seem to remember this being one of the logical fallacies in a philosophy class -- you can't assess an idea based on whose it is. How hard/risky it is to remain open to ideas, no matter where they come from. After all, we might need to change our minds about something, or admit (gasp!) to error."

Perhaps the most interesting letter came from Bill Peterson, who pushed the idea of NOT labelling a little farther. He described a group that refuses to name God at all. "The place for the weekly evening worship service is called the 'anomen.' The service includes welcome/response, wordless ululating invocation, confession, homily, benediction. There is also a wedding service in the 'Nameless' tradition. All other religions are, of course, the 'Named.' They are referred to in ways similar to our practices; feared, hated, disgusted, puzzled, etc. There are those who use the word 'Named' as an expletive, as we might use the 'Devil'."

Bill attached a sample service, from which I will excerpt just these lines: "We do not pray to You, or ask favors or recognition from You, for requesting such asks You to favor us over others who are also Your creations. Rather we confess that we always risk the sin of pride and presumption and that the very names we bear symbolize those sins, for we too often strive to arrogate our names and ourselves above others, to insist that our petty plans and arid achievements have meaning beyond those whom we love or whom we have influence and power. Let us never forget that we are less than nothing against Your nameless magnificence..."

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

I think that the lectionary should be a guide, not a straitjacket. So when I looked up the psalm for this coming Sunday, July 8, I found that I wasn't inspired by Psalm 48. But the alternate reading, Psalm 123, did speak to me. The way verse 2 described how a maid is supposed to look at her mistress, a servant at his master, made me think about the way my dog looks at me.

1. I look up to you.  
You tower above me.

2. I roll my eyes up to see your face.  
On four paws, I circle your ankles.  
I adore you.  
You feed me, you pet me, you walk me.  
You are everything to me.

3. Open your heart to me.  
We dogs have endured enough contempt.  
We are scorned, we are beaten, we are kicked  
into the cold and wet to fend for ourselves.

4. We know too well what it is like  
to be cursed as a cur.  
We worship you, but we fear you.  
Show us that you can be loving;  
Welcome us into the warmth of your family.

You won't find this version in *Everyday Psalms*, but if you want other versions, you can order the book through Wood Lake Publications, [info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com) or 1-800-663-2775

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#### YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

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